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AUTHOR Abram, Suzanne
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ABSTRACT

Many English departments employ world literature instructors with no obvious training in world literature. Ideally, all subjects should be taught by specialists. In practice, world literature courses are routinely rotated among an unenthusiastic faculty with generally no effort to remedy the situation by recruiting experts. Although world literature is usually a course for nonmajors, nonmajor and major students should be equally entitled to a good education. While there is no degree in world literature, there is a doctorate in comparative literature which perhaps comes the closest to training in the field of world literature, with the ability to read literary works not written in English and a certain predisposition to see literature in broad terms. The popular notion that the world literature instructor need merely to have a good grounding in general principles of literary analysis and an open mind is riddled with problematic issues. Knowledge of three or four foreign languages should be a prerequisite for teaching world literature. Lack of this knowledge can cause many limitations on the teaching of the course. As long as English departments do not emphasize foreign language training as a requisite for teaching world literature, classrooms will continue to have 30 students who read no Latin trying to understand the "Aeneid" under the guidance of an instructor who also reads no Latin. (CR)

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The Need for Foreign Language Training in World Literature Instruction

by Suzanne Abram
Department of English
Auburn University
10 May 1997

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The Need for Foreign Language Training in World Literature Instruction

When, in 1996, I accepted a teaching job at a large research institution to teach world literature and met the other world literature instructors, I was surprised at the disparity in our backgrounds. Since we had all been hired to teach the first half of a two-course sequence of world literature, I had assumed that my fellow instructors would have some sort of formal training in world literature, and that this would take the form of fluency in one or more foreign languages, a background in comparative literature, or at least some previous experience in teaching world literature. But although this was the case for some of the instructors, it did not hold true for others. The English department, it seemed, was quite willing to hire specialists in twentieth-century British literature to teach Homer, Ovid, and Dante. Why? Not because people with more obvious qualifications weren't available--the job market was highly depressed, and talented people in all areas were going unemployed. Not because of favoritism, or out of some lapse of good sense; many English departments employ world literature instructors with no obvious training in world literature.

That such a hiring policy is common among English departments is troubling and sparks many questions. Who should teach world literature? What are the proper qualifications for a teacher of this subject? Should "experts" in world literature be trained and hired, or should world literature be a subject generally taught by all faculty, regardless of an individual faculty member's areas of

specialization? And what value should be placed upon language training or historical background for world literature instructors?

Should world literature be taught by experts?

The first question we will take up here is the easiest. Should world literature be taught by experts in world literature, however we may subsequently decide to define "experts"? Or should teaching assignments in world literature be rotated among all faculty members of the English department, regardless of their qualifications? The obvious answer here must be in favor of instruction by experts. Ideally, all subjects should be taught by experts, and it is hard to imagine a reason why world literature should be an exception.

In practice, however, not only are world literature courses routinely rotated among an unenthusiastic faculty, but there is generally no effort to remedy the situation by recruiting experts. World literature courses are usually offered at the freshman or sophomore level as courses that satisfy general education requirements or are part of a core curriculum. In large institutions with graduate programs, such courses are routinely assigned to graduate students, usually doctoral candidates. In universities and colleges without a large pool of graduate students to draw from, world literature courses go to adjuncts and to tenured or tenure-track faculty who rotate the duty.

There are economic reasons for this behavior on the part of English departments, and these economic reasons should be given

their due weight. Graduate students and adjuncts are cheaper to hire than full-time faculty, and universities are under constraint to watch their budgets. Pared budgets lead (in theory, at least) to lower tuition, and, other things being equal, lower tuition is a good thing. But is the good of a student taking a world literature class more benefitted by low tuition or by instruction from a professor expert in his field? To say that lower tuition is more important than providing students with highly qualified faculty members is not a very optimistic statement about higher education. While not all universities can employ the very best faculty--for the simple reason that the very best faculty cannot be everywhere at once--all universities would seem to be ethically compelled to recruit the best faculty they can find. There may, of course, be considerable debate as to what constitutes "best faculty," and disagreement here is legitimate. But it would be a dedicated miser indeed who would argue that the only criterion for choosing the best faculty members should be their cost.

Why, then, does the practice of employing the inexpert to teach world literature persist? World literature is usually a course for nonmajors, a so-called "service" course. As such, teaching it gains its teacher no special prestige within her department, and therefore it is an undesirable teaching assignment. English departments view their own prestige as being bound up in their majors and graduate students, not in nonmajors who take a single literature course to fulfil general education requirements. In practice, this leads to assigning graduate students to teach

world literature classes, because the department's need to boast of the successes of its graduate students (who cannot get jobs without teaching experience) outweighs its obligation to provide the best possible education in world literature to nonmajors who wander into the English department out of duty or curiosity.

Surely we may agree, however, that a student's status as a nonmajor is no reason to provide him with inferior instruction. A "service" course is a poor service if it is deliberately stocked with inexpert teachers. Nonmajors may not plan to interpret Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Joyce after graduation, but neither will most students who graduate with a bachelor's degree in English, if truth be told. Moreover, because the nonmajor student's exposure to literature in college is to be brief, that would seem all the more reason for it to be as lucid and intense and accurate as possible. A poor teacher in world literature will not only leave the nonmajor in ignorance, but it will also leave him sceptical of the value of studying literature. The existence of a large body of hostile alumni is highly unlikely to benefit the English department.

In addition, there is precedent for hiring specialists for service courses offered by the English department. Composition courses are often designed or supervised by specialists in composition and rhetoric. Though everyone from graduate students to full professors teaches composition, there is usually substantial direction from the department's composition and rhetoric faculty on how the composition courses are to be run, and

all English departments include faculty who specialize in composition and rhetoric. Is teaching a survey of the world's literature really so much less important than teaching the composition of a five-page essay?

We might cite other arguments for the use of expert instructors in world literature classes, but we have already seen the strongest argument, which should be sufficient in itself: that nonmajor and major students are equally entitled to a good education, and that expert instructors are far more likely than inexpert ones to run a good class. This basic principle should hold as true for world literature as it does for other subjects; certainly there is no evidence to the contrary.

As of yet we have not discussed what makes an expert in world literature. If we are to employ experts, who are they to be?

What constitutes expertise in world literature?

Obviously, an expert in a given field is one who has background or training in it. What, specifically, does this come to in the case of world literature?

There is no degree in world literature, nor any area of specialization or concentration in world literature as a minor or major area in a doctoral program in English. There is such a thing as a doctorate in comparative literature, and this, perhaps, would seem to come closest to training in the field of world literature. However, the field of comparative literature has changed significantly from what its name would suggest, so that often its practitioners, in fact, seldom compare any two national literatures

but instead practice in the recondite field of theory or compare literature with a non-literary body of works such as art, music, the law, and so forth. Even comparatists that do compare two national literatures--i.e., French and German twentieth-century works--will probably find themselves overspecialized and not the ideal expert for a world literature course.

Despite the limitations of the comparatist, though, we see in him some qualities of the ideal world literature instructor: namely, the ability to read literary works not written in English and a certain predisposition to see literature in broad terms. The latter quality is one which almost everyone would agree is important for the world literature instructor; the former is more problematic, and we will consider it in depth at a later point.

The willingness to look at any given literary text as part of a vast and highly dispersed whole (dispersed in time, in place, and consequently in culture) is a perspective which most of us would agree is indispensible to the world literature teacher. Here we must examine the distinction between the willingness to integrate all texts into a world-literature perspective and the experience of actually having done so. The latter is an unattainable ideal for human beings. No single individual can hope to be familiar with all literature. Even if the literature of the world were conveniently spread before him in English translation, he could not hope to master so extensive a body of texts.

English departments are keenly aware of this fact, and it is for this reason that they emphasize that while their instructors

have not, of course, read all of world literature, or even a significantly great portion of it, every instructor should be open to the idea of incorporating foreign and unfamiliar texts into his understanding of world literature. If one cannot do everything, one should be ready to do anything. It is this idea on which the possibility and practicality of world literature is founded in the minds of English departments. They will not attempt to hire experts in all literatures of the world, since there are none to be found; instead, they will hire the open-minded who have a good grounding in "general principles of literature" and who can obligingly apply these principles to any literary work set before them. Chinese lyric poetry, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and African folk tales may all be subjected, with equal appropriateness, to conventional analysis. If one of the three is to be replaced with, say, Dante's *Inferno*, the world literature teacher will be able to take the change without breaking stride, regardless of his familiarity or unfamiliarity with the trecento Tuscan tongue or Guelf-Ghibelline politics. Such knowledge would be useful and desirable, of course, but it is scarcely essential. A world literature instructor who is to teach Dante will not be hired or fired based on his knowledge of Dante's language or culture, but on his willingness to take his best shot at applying general principles of literary analysis to a translation of the *Divine Comedy*.

There are two problems with this conventional position. First, we must ask ourselves how open to new cultural perspectives

and literary texts an instructor will probably be if he has never in the past bothered to study this text or this culture in any depth. If an instructor regularly teaches Homer but has no Greek and has never taken any courses in classical studies, does his behavior, to some degree, contradict his avowed "openness" to Greek literature? Is this openness, or indifference? Is the belief that standard literary principles of analysis are sufficient to deal with any text a justified use of general principles, or is it self-centered, complacent hubris?

Second, we must question the legitimacy of the position because the English department itself does not seem consistent in holding to it. The department that hires world literature instructors merely on their demonstrating expertise in "general principles" will not hire its tenure-track faculty without their demonstrating extensive familiarity with the culture, dialect(s), and texts of their area. If general principles suffice to teach any literature, then why must eighteenth-century British literature assistant professors meet more rigorous standards than world literature professors? Surely it is harder to teach a class that covers world literature from 1700 to the present--which would include British literature--than to teach a class that touches only on eighteenth-century British literature? The subject matter of a world literature course, at least, is immeasurably more extensive.

To this, an English department might object that the eighteenth-century English course would be for majors, whereas the world literature course would be for nonmajors, and that the

differing standards for employment match the differing expectations for students. There is some merit to this argument, but it does not address the fundamental issue: why is the most comprehensive literature course given for nonmajors and assigned to nonspecialists? If it is because the literature is non-English, then why is it being taught by the English department?

The answers are not obvious. The location of world literature classes within the English department has, perhaps, more to do with custom (we've always done it this way) and economics (world literature classes bring the English department increased money and power) than anything else. But it is certain that the conventional notion--that the world literature instructor need merely have a good grounding in general principles of literary analysis and an open mind--is riddled with problematic issues.

Specialized training would seem a desirable characteristic for world literature instructors. If no instructor can be completely grounded in all the world's literatures, some training is presumably preferable to none. The English department is not well suited to providing this training (despite the irony that the English department will offer the world literature courses for which one needs to be trained), since its upper-level and graduate courses are devoted to literature in the English language. Presumably, the would-be world literature instructor would find it necessary to leave the English department to take courses in foreign language departments. But at this point, the future instructor will find that the literature courses he wants to take

require, at the least, a reading knowledge of the foreign language in question. Courses offered on *The Odyssey* by the Classics department will not flinch from demanding their students to read Homeric Greek. At that, the classics professor is relatively kind, because he can be expected to lecture in English. A course on nineteenth-century French literature might not only expect students to read French but to be prepared for class discussion in the same language.

Obviously, knowledge of three or four foreign languages as a prerequisite for teaching world literature (in translation) would be a far-reaching change from the way in which world literature is now taught. Would the change be worth it? Would it even be desirable at all?

Foreign language training as a prerequisite for teaching world literature

It is possible to conceive arguments against learning something new. There are opportunity costs; studying a foreign language forces a student, alas, to give up the opportunity of studying something else. Is knowing Latin more important than knowing literary theory? Is Arabic more important than epistolary novels? For that matter, is Arabic more important than learning another language, say, Chinese? Learning the basic grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language is usually a two-year (four-semester) process. Even graduate students, who are likely to spend over ten years wending their way through academia from their freshman year to their dissertation to defense, can only sandwich

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in a limited number of languages.

Moreover, why is it necessary to train world literature instructors in other languages when world literature classes will be taught in English? What is the point of being able to read *The Song of Roland* in Old French when you are only going to show your students an English translation? Are students particularly edified by a teacher who will bid them look for the wonderful wordplay on page seven and then sheepishly retract her statement by saying, "Well, it's not there, but it's in the Old French, and it's really wonderful in Old French, believe me"? Given that the student of Old French took this teacher away from other learning opportunities and resulted only in the teacher's abilities to point to beauties in the text that are invisible to her students, was it really a wise allocation of time to study Old French? Would ignorance of Old French actually help this teacher?

Certainly, the rule of thumb in the academic world is that one should never seek ignorance. (There may be a few exceptions to this rule, most notably the "opportunity costs" argument above.) Moreover, it is doubtful whether this teacher's study of Old French resulted "only" in her ability to speak to parts of the text that have been erased in translation. What else has she learned?

If she is capable of reading *Roland* in Old French, then she is capable of an educated evaluation of the different translations available on the market. Any English professor can cut out the clumsily written and the awkwardly phrased, but only someone capable of reading Old French can comment intelligently on the

accuracy and fidelity of the translation.

Second, our world literature instructor may be able to integrate part of the Old French text into her class. She might use the Old French to show her students the metrical structure and the rhyme scheme of *Roland*. (Without this, the students might come away believing that *Roland* was written in prose; *telling* students that there was a rhyme scheme is no substitute for *showing* them, however inadequately and clumsily, what it is.) She might use the Old French titles of nobility to emphasize to her students that Roland "the count" does not hold a rank precisely equivalent to that of a nineteenth-century nobleman. She might even be able to bring in the Old French text and point to some of the wordplay that she had earlier been embarrassed to find to have been translated out.

Third, because the acquisition of a new language tends to involve a certain amount of acculturation as well, our hypothetical world literature instructor would probably be able to make a few sage comments about, say, the feudal system in France and its importance to understanding *Roland*. She might be able to point to the difference between the fictionality of the text and the reality of Charlemagne's counts.

Fourth, she would appear both knowledgeable and committed to her students. A teacher who must admit she cannot read Old French does not send the message to her students that *Roland* is important. If *Roland* were all that important (the students are apt to think, perhaps somewhat priggishly), our teacher would have done what was

necessary in order to read it. An obviously semi-knowledgeable teacher will lose credit with her students quickly. A teacher who has bothered to learn Old French, on the other hand, will present her students with an impressive enthusiasm for *Roland*.

Fifth, a literature teacher who cannot access the text she teaches will be on slippery ground, and she will know it and be accordingly uncomfortable. In a discipline where interpretations may hang on the connotations of a single word, it can be both awkward and intimidating to know that one does *not* know the text that one is teaching, and that the true text will forever remain inaccessible--or remain inaccessible until one takes the time to learn the appropriate language. In addition, much of the scholarly literature on the text will assume the reader is capable of reading the text in its original language, and thus the teacher will be prevented from the full benefits of past scholarship on the text. The world literature teacher who cannot read *Roland* in Old French cannot know how much of what she sees in the translated text is due to the translator. In her teaching, she may tread with excessive caution as a result.

Alternatively, she may plunge forward and assume that there is no significant difference between the *Roland* translation and the Old French text. In some ways, this is the most dangerous consequence that can result for a world literature teacher who has no language training. It is highly dangerous because the mistake is so seductive. Students make this error constantly; seeing only the translation, they forget by insensible degrees that it is a

translation, and that an incomprehensible, Old French *Roland* exists on the library shelves and (more authentic yet) on the parchment pages of medieval manuscripts. World literature instructors should constantly fight this error on their students' part, yet a world literature teacher who is monolingual may easily find himself slipping into the same insensibility.

From this blindness other errors may follow. Yet, even if the teacher is fortunate and does not err in consequence, there is already one tremendous mistake made. Presumably, we want our students to read Homer, Dante, Shakespeare. We would be shocked to find that students are not reading Shakespeare but a "translated" Shakespeare; footnotes are acceptable, but Shakespeare put into modern language is not, most would agree, *Shakespeare*. Should we not also want our students to know, as far as possible, Homer's *Odyssey* as he wrote it? We do not really want our students to read Lattimore's Homer's *Odyssey*, or Fitzgerald's Homer's *Odyssey*, or Fagles' Homer's *Odyssey*. This is not what we put on our syllabi, not what our students expect, not what the world expects of world literature courses. As far as possible, the world literature teacher is expected to teach Homer, and not a translator's version of Homer. Yet it is precisely this that becomes, if not impossible, then unlikely, without foreign language training. A Greekless world literature teacher will teach Homer's *Odyssey* and not his translator's Homer's *Odyssey* only by sheer blind luck. Blind, because he will never be able to check on differences between translation and Greek text. Luck is always possible, and

the world literature teacher may be lucky in choosing a good translation out of the many on the market. But do we want the quality of our teaching to be determined by luck?

Plato, in describing his theory of the Forms, used a bed as an example: there is the real bed, and there is the Form of the Bed which it participates in imperfectly. The relationship of a translation to the original text is very similar to Plato's bed and the Form of the Bed. The goal of learning must be to reach as far as possible to the Form of the Bed. Translations are good and useful, for without them students would not have any access to most of world literature, but students need to be conscious of the limitations of the translation, and to make students conscious of these limitations, the teacher must be even more aware of them. And if the students cannot invest the two-years time to learn Greek to read the *Odyssey*, at least the teacher, who may spend twenty years on and off teaching this text, can and should. Otherwise, we are deliberately creating a situation where the blind are led, if not by the blind, at least by the visually challenged.

Conclusion

For all these reasons, we should reform the hiring of world literature teachers. In a department where composition for nonmajor freshmen is a recognized specialty, why not also consider world literature for nonmajor sophomores a legitimate area for academic specialization? While it is true that no scholar may know all languages and all literatures of the world, it is obvious that a graduate student who decides that she will teach world literature

has the opportunity to pick up several languages and to begin to focus her scholarly efforts in these areas. Comparative literature scholars do this, and graduate students in English should be no less proficient in their scholarship, if they intend to specialize in world literature. As long as English departments do not emphasize foreign language training as a requisite for teaching world literature, we will continue to have classrooms where thirty students who read no Latin try to understand Vergil's *Aeneid* under the guidance of a teacher who also reads no Latin. And this is surely not a desirable situation.

--Suzanne Abram